

Launch of the Leeds Bi-centenary Transformation Project

Leeds Civic Centre

25 January 2007

Pride in Our Heritage

Keynote Address by Professor Gus John

The Lord Mayor, distinguished guests, friends and comrades.

We are gathered here for the launch of a project that commemorates the Act of Parliament in 1807 that heralded the abolition of that fiendish trade in humans as expendable commodities, that most barbaric period in the history of humankind, that holocaust on a truly epic scale...., the transatlantic slave trade.

Before I share my thoughts with you, therefore, I want to place myself in the presence of the Creator and acknowledge and pay homage to the Spirit of our Glorious Ancestors. I would respectfully ask you, irrespective of whether or not you subscribe to a particular faith or belief system, to observe the next few moments with me.

Honour, praise and glory to Olodumare, the Creator.

Response: Ase.

I pay homage to Egun, Spirit of our Ascended Ancestors.

Response: Ibase.

I pay homage to my Ori. Ase

***I pay homage to the spirit of all those who perished during
transportation in slave ships. Ibase***

***I pay homage to the spirit of all those who were hurled alive into the
ocean from slave ships. Ibase.***

***I pay homage to the spirit of all those who died from physical abuse
and from disease on the plantations. Ibase.***

***I pay homage to the spirit of all those who were murdered as they
followed that fundamental instinct for freedom with which we are
all imbued, and tried to escape the barbarism and human
degradation they were forced to endure. Ibase.***

***I pay homage to the spirit of all those slaves whose courageous and
historic struggles led to the undermining of the forced labour system
and the eventual abolition of slavery: Olaudah Equiano; Sojourner
Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Nanny of the Maroons,
Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and a host of
others. Ibase.***

I pay homage to the spirit of all those slaves who led the rebellions on the plantations in the 33 years after 1807 before chattel slavery in the British Empire was finally transformed: Sam Sharpe, Paul Bogle, William Gordon, and a host of others. Ibase.

I pay homage to the Spirit of all those who devoted their lives to the struggle against colonialism, for the end of Empire and for national independence. Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), Obafemi Awolowo (Nigeria), Joe Appiah (Ghana), Beoku Betts, (Sierra Leone), Nii Odoi Annan (Ghana), George Padmore (Trinidad), T Albert Marryshow (Grenada), Eric Williams (Trinidad), Marcus Garvey (Jamaica), Amy Jacques Garvey (Jamaica), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya) Ibase.

I pay homage to the spirit of people everywhere who have given their lives in the struggle for freedom and justice and against oppression and political repression. Ibase.

I pray that as we reflect upon 1807 and its significance in our time, we will each stand upon the shoulders of our fearless Ancestors and embrace the responsibility to attend to the quality of our being and of our doing, so that we might be worthy inheritors of the legacy for which they gave their lives. Ase! Ase! Ase!

Thank you!

Let me continue by, first, commending and congratulating those who conceived of the Leeds Bi-Centenary Transformation Project and successfully secured the funds to make their vision a reality.

I applaud your vision and mission and your chosen theme of 'African Caribbean Survival and Transformation'. It is in endorsement of **that** vision and mission that I have chosen to call this talk: **Pride in Our Heritage**.

For the rest of this talk, I want to do four things:

1. To make the point, all too frequently forgotten, that our heritage, as African people whose identity was reshaped in the Caribbean, did not begin with the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, the capacity of our forebears to survive the ravages of the slave trade derived from that historical legacy that pre-dated the slave trade by many centuries.
2. To underscore the point that throughout the slave trade and the plantation system, the fundamental instinct for freedom, the indomitableness of the human spirit and the essential spirituality of African people led to unimaginable acts of heroism which were thwarted by equally inconceivable acts of barbarism and even genocide.
3. To argue that, apart from stating the obvious, i.e., that all life began in Africa, we share a common heritage and we have a duty, if we are not to falsify history, to make the connections between the way in which the slavery and plantation system was organised and exploited for the expansion of mercantile capitalism, and the way generations of white working class people here in Britain were

exploited and made to acquiesce in the enslavement of Africans on the plantations across the Empire.

4. To say what we should all seek to achieve in this bi-centenary year and beyond.

Given the time at my disposal, I will be able to deal with each of these only very briefly.

1. Our history did not begin in a slave ship.

For every opportunity that this bicentenary year brings, it also carries 10 dangers.

Perhaps the biggest danger of all is that it will reinforce the belief held by many black people and white people alike that our history as African heritage people began with slavery and our identity as African people born in the Caribbean is defined solely by slavery and its aftermath.

Sadly, those of us who insist that we are not 'African' and do not want to be called African anything, whether it be 'African', 'African- Caribbean' or 'of African heritage', simply delude ourselves and help to perpetuate the view that, for us, history did begin at the point at which we were herded into the hold of a slave ship, bound for some plantation in the Americas or the West Indies.

Many renowned authors have done the world a huge service by pointing up the way the history of Africa, the cradle of civilisation and the place where the human race originated, and the history of African peoples in Africa and in the African diaspora, has been denied, distorted and falsified over many

centuries. Writers such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Yosef ben-Jochannan, J. A. Rogers, Ivan Van Sertima, Eric Williams, C L R James, Basil Davidson, Walter Rodney, James Walvin, Peter Fryer and more recently, Robin Walker.

In his book 'When We Ruled', Walker quotes a Dr Victor Robinson who observed:

'It is one of the paradoxes of history that Africa, the Mother of Civilisation, remained for over two thousand years the Dark Continent. To the moderns Africa was the region where ivory was sought for Europe, and slaves for America. In the time of Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), as the satirist informs us, geographers in drawing maps filled in the gaps with savage pictures. Where towns should have been, they placed elephants'. (Walker, 2006)

Let me not labour the point. Suffice it to say that thousands of years before the birth of Christ and before Mohammed, civilisations in Africa were exhibiting the most advanced forms of architecture, astronomy, commerce, art and social and political organisation. The folk medicine, the cuisine, language forms, and customs and ceremonials relating to religion, entertainment, dress, music and life and death among the people of the African diaspora, all represent African retentions that had no origins in the Americas or in the West Indies. Writers such as the late Louise Bennett, Kamau Brathwaite, Erna Brodber and Hubert Devonish, themselves products of the African diaspora, have contributed enormously to our understanding of ourselves by identifying and placing these African retentions in their historical context.

2. The fundamental instinct for freedom

One other grave danger associated with this bicentenary year is that it will give added impetus to the process by which those who won their own liberation are written out of history, while some presumed white 'saviours' of enslaved Africans are given iconic status.

In the same way that the world knew of Florence Nightingale long before we told it about Mary Seale, similarly, British historians erased out of history Olaudah Equiano, Toussaint L'Ouverture and other monumental figures in the anti-slavery movement and projected William Wilberforce as **the** architect of slavery abolition.

Let me make just two points about that. The first is that throughout the history of the transatlantic slave trade, that fundamental instinct for freedom with which every human being is endowed because we are born free and meant to be free, led slaves to use all their might and their wits to break out of their shackles and seek freedom for themselves and those near and dear to them. Even when the slavemasters hacked them to death and strung them up to act as a deterrent to others, yet more of them determined that they would choose death rather than live as beasts of burden with less status than their masters' horses.

It is not for nothing that that evocative spiritual was handed down through the generations:

Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom!

Oh, freedom over me!

For, before I'd be a slave

I'd be buried in my grave

And go home to my God..... And be free.

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Keynote Address at the Launch of the Leeds Bicentenary Transformation Project.
25 January 2007.

The second point I want to make in this section is this.

In your publicity about the bicentenary project there is the statement:

'In 1807 Britain transformed itself from a slave-trading sovereignty into a proud anti-slavery nation....'.

Well, frankly, that's the hype. History records otherwise.

Abolition did not come about because Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and the rest of them, and the British Church and State suddenly got sick of the barbarism and the protracted holocaust that the slave trade represented. They did not belatedly discover that the African slaves shared a common humanity with them after all. Everyone should read CLR James' 'Black Jacobins', and if you have read it before as I am sure many of you have, make sure and read it again during this bicentenary year. It would serve as a hugely useful antidote to the hype.

The slave rebellion in Haiti which was the spark of the Haitian revolution that L'Ouverture and Dessalines led successfully, defeating the British, Spanish and French armies, was in many ways the culmination of a series of rebellions among the slave population of the Caribbean and the Americas in the latter half of the 18th century.

James writes:

'In August 1791, after two years of the French revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for 12 years. The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and

the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte's brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte's expedition resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which lasted to this day.

The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement'.

James 1980

Make no mistake. It is those huge 'interests that were involved' and the geopolitics and the economic dogfights involving the British, the French, the Spanish and the Americans in the face of those slave rebellions that led to the 1807 Act.

It took a further 31 years after 1807 for the British to put an end to slavery in the Empire. Meanwhile, because they knew of the vote in Parliament in 1807, and emboldened by the historic victory of L'Ouverture, Dessalines and the slaves in Haiti, the slaves in the Caribbean and the Americas were restless for freedom and staged a whole series of further rebellions which the British fleet, on behalf of the slavemasters and to protect British economic interests, repressed with characteristic savagery.

But, even that was not the end of the story. The first half of the 20th century, for example, saw a series of general strikes and workers insurrections in the English-speaking Caribbean, ending with Jamaica in 1938, events that were to

influence the proceedings of the 5th Pan-African Congress in Manchester in October 1945, a congress of Africans from the Motherland and from across the diaspora, dedicated to putting an end to colonial rule in Africa and the Caribbean, or at least securing a greater measure of self government.

In this very important book, *Labour in the West Indies*, first published as a Fabian Society pamphlet in 1939, Arthur Lewis documents those workers' struggles to put an end to conditions redolent of slavery in which they were still working on the plantations one hundred years after the abolition of slavery.

3. Our common heritage

In my evidence to the Runnymede Trust's Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, I observed as follows:

'The future of Britain lies in the hands of descendants of slave owners and of slaves, of indentured labourers, of feudal landlords and serfs, of industrialists and factory workers, of lairds and crofters, of refugees and asylum seekers'. (Parekh: Runnymede Trust 2000)

Let me be clear. I am in no way seeking to equate the conditions in which white working class people in this country were made to operate in the 'white heat' of the industrial revolution with the conditions of chattel slavery and the denial of their very humanity that African slaves suffered. To do that would not only be perverse, it would also falsify history in a most irresponsible way. That said, however, we need to have regard to the relationship between the struggles about which Arthur Lewis wrote almost 70 years ago and what Edward Thompson depicted as 'the Making of the English Working Class'.

It is important to remember that slavery and the plantation system post-abolition provided both the raw material and the wealth for the expansion of British industry and commensurately the growth of the labour movement in Britain. But even as labour organised itself here in the British Isles and struggled for better pay and more humane and safer working conditions, the workers in the Caribbean on whom they depended for so much were left to struggle on their own. Instead, the church, the state, the education system, the ruling elites and the press here in Britain systematically peddled the racism that had been used in justification for the slave trade and encouraged the white working class to see the struggles of workers in the colonies as antithetical to their own interests.

In his book *The Future in the Present*, CLR James quotes a letter Leonard Lyle, President of Tate & Lyle, wrote in the Times on 10 May 1939:

'I cannot believe that I was unsound in stating that the West Indian labourer does not even remotely resemble the English labourer'.

(James:1977)

James' retort is characteristically direct and gets to the heart of the matter:

'Tate and Lyle as everyone who buys sugar should know, make a fortune every year by selling to the British workers sugar grown by Jamaican workers. They must keep these two divided at all costs. Hence, with that solemn shamelessness so characteristic of British capitalism, Mr Lyle discovers that the West Indies labourer does not remotely resemble the English labourer. The real trouble is, of course, that he resembles the English labourer too much for Mr Capitalist Lyle.'

4. What should we be seeking to achieve in this bicentennial year and beyond?

The press briefing for this project posed the question:

'Can we transform today's society into a better one for tomorrow's citizens - inspired by those who fought for human rights and transformed their societies for all our benefit?'

I would invite you to ponder over a few more questions:

What should we be seeking to learn about 1807 and the events that led up to that Parliamentary vote?

What is the relationship between 1807 and 1838?

In commemorating 1807, are we not forgetting the savagery with which those who demanded that the Act should be applied and that they should be given their freedom were massacred between 1807 and 1838 for daring to stand up for their rights?

How, then, do we connect present day Britain and all its citizens with that history and with its relationship to the racist discourse and the racial attacks that are part of the web and weave of the very fabric of British society, despite the feigned surprise and outrage over the goings on in the Big Brother house?

How do we connect present day Britain and all its citizens with that history and with its effects upon the social and economic condition of Caribbean societies today, as well as upon the African heritage population here in Britain?

How can we reconnect ourselves with our African ancestry through those African retentions in our life and death rituals, in our Yoruba religion, in our music, in our natural remedies, in our dress, in our food?

How can this entire nation learn lessons from that holocaust, which many would prefer us to forget as we commemorate the abolition of slavery, and focus on making the future we face the future we actually want for ourselves and our children?

And as Tony Blair wages his ubiquitous 'war on terror', what must the British State and Britain plc do to acknowledge their inestimable debt to the people of the African diaspora and especially the descendants of those who perished in the holocaust of Empire?

Most of those questions must remain rhetorical. Time does not allow for anything else. Let me just comment on the last one, briefly.

The late Bernie Grant MP spearheaded a campaign for slavery reparations which did not earn him too many friends in high places. There appears to be the view that because the logistics of reparations are mind boggling even to the likes of Bill Gates and 'silicon valley', nothing should be done, except of course handing out the sort of grants you were given for this project.

As far as the grant is concerned, you have due cause to be pleased because you put a lot of thought and a huge amount of work into preparing the bid. But, frankly, we should not get so deliriously happy about these sums of money that have now gone to various black projects around the country that we fail to hold the British state and corporate Britain to account, even 200 years later.

We have a growing corpus of historical writings on the slave trade and on abolition, writings as I indicated above, in which historians set the record straight and reclaim our history from the 'holocaust deniers' and from those who want to sanitise imperialism and the ravages of capitalist expansion of the barbarism and savagery that it represented.

Speaking personally, I am more interested in what the British state and corporate Britain will do NOW to make restitution to those who are still being made victims daily. And that is because chattel slavery may have been abolished finally in 1838, but capitalism simply changed its clothes and relocated itself.... And when we became surplus to its requirements in the Caribbean, it relocated us here. Now that we are increasingly surplus to its requirements here, it relegates us in increasingly disproportionate numbers to its prisons, youth offender institutions and mental asylums.

I want to see a huge investment during this bicentennial year and for the next 25 years in leadership programmes for young African heritage men and women; a huge investment over the next 25 years in rescuing African Caribbean descendants of slaves from the nightmare of gun crime, a life expectancy of 25 among African Caribbean males in some areas of Britain, the worst schooling outcomes, an almost total absence among young entrepreneurs (or older ones for that matter), an almost total absence among doctors and dentists, among scientists and engineers, among airline pilots.

I want to see our economic base extend beyond barbing, hairdressing and hair products, beyond car valeting and fast food outlets, beyond pop music production and promotion.

I want to see a massive investment in the Caribbean countries to put an end to ignorance and illiteracy; to tackle unemployment and hopelessness among the young; to make potable water and functional sewerage systems a reality

and not just a pipe dream; to rescue our people from the scourge of aids and the orgy of gun violence; to grow technical expertise; to use their natural resources for sustainable development and to underpin their economies such that their populations don't see a future only in being a playground for tourists.

I want to see Britain fighting in their corner more robustly on matters of fair trade and environmental protection.

Colleges and Universities across the land are in the market for overseas students and make their financial forecasts, not on the basis of 'top up fees' but by projecting earnings from overseas students' fees. The fees charged are prohibitive except for the wealthy. So, two contradictory programmes are running here. Those Universities and Colleges are pursuing an agenda set by the British Government to widen participation and improve access for domestic students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Those institutions are in constant dispute with Government about the amount of money available to them to do that. Conversely, they market themselves overseas and go to great lengths to attract foreign students who are required to pay handsomely for the opportunity to gain qualifications from those British institutions. No widening participation here. The fees paid by those who are rich enough to send their children to our Colleges and Universities are invariably more than most families in those countries have to live on for an entire year.

Why, then, should the British state and corporate Britain not fund up to 100 places per Caribbean country per year to enable suitably qualified students to attend University in the UK? And when I say 'fund' I mean pay the cost of travel, fees, accommodation, books, laptop, food, leisure pursuits, travel home and back once a year throughout their stay here, the whole lot.

Stipulate that the programme's principal focus must be on building capacity and technical expertise in particular by all means. Make it a requirement that those gaining qualifications through that route must return and work for their country for a minimum of 3 years by all means. But, enable those countries to pay them appropriately such that they have an incentive to stay and build the country, improving the quality of life for all its citizens.

Given the unquantifiable wealth we generated for this nation and continue to generate in myriad ways for descendants of those who presided over that protracted holocaust, is that too much to ask?

This is but one pretty obvious way in which restitution could begin. I am sure the people and governments of the Caribbean could think of many more, just as we can here. I hear much talk about 'celebrating' 200 years since the abolition of slavery'. The price we have continued to pay is too great, the legacy too crippling for us to be partying. We are still burying our dead, literally and metaphorically. Let us therefore take stock of how we have built upon the foundations laid for us by our courageous ancestors, especially by those who in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave their lives in the struggle against the barbarism and savagery that was the hallmark of imperialism and colonialism. Let us remind ourselves and teach our children and all children in this nation who they were, what they did, what was done to them, what that means for us and what, therefore, we ourselves must do in our time.

I want to end with a quote from one of my favourite authors, Federico Mayor:

'We should not be afraid of questioning things that are self-evident, of tearing off the veil of rhetoric to get down to the substance of things, of blowing away the dust of bureaucracy in order to reveal the end

purpose of Government, or of banishing dogma if the facts show that it is nonsense.

For the human community, both past and present, the essential means survival. But today, to a far greater degree than in the past, surviving means sharing resources and knowledge, preserving the boundaries of nature and the diversity of cultures, accepting both identity and difference so that we can live on good terms with one another, forming alliances so that **together** we shall be strong to win the battle against adversity'.

I wish the Leeds Bi-centenary Transformation Project a successful and progressive year in 2007 and pray that you have an impact in this City and beyond for generations to come.

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